

“Adajya” : What Does It Represent?

Prasenjit Das

Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University, Guwahati, Assam

Abstract: “Adajya”, an Assamese-language film directed by Santwana Bardoloi in 1996, provides an interesting cultural study of the plight of three ‘strong-willed’ widows always fighting for asserting their identity. Taking up the issue of representation, this paper seeks to address the following questions: What happens when representation of women through media technology takes place? How does such representation also get influenced by a male dominated cultural context? Is the film “Adajya” really successful in representing the plight of the Assamese women? Reflecting on the works of authors and critics like Laura Mulvey, Sue Thornham and Judy Wajcman, this paper seeks to explore how production, exchange and circulation of cultural values not only problematise the issues of representation but also provide valuable insights into the processes of representation (through media-technology). I would also try to examine if awareness of such issues can change our attitudes towards society and women at a time when feminism raises questions on the role of media technology in representing the condition of women. My argument in this paper is that such representation cannot really communicate the real picture of the conditions of women. It is because technology has its own limitations for which even “Adajya” may look incomplete in addressing and communicating certain important issues it had originally intended to raise.

Key Words: Media Technology, Representation, Woman’s self, Identity Crisis.

Introduction:

To make a study of the plight of widows in a traditional Assamese society, one may purposively watch “Adajya”—an Assamese-language film directed by Santwana Bardoloi. “Adajya” literally means “which cannot be burnt”. This film is based on the Assamese novel *Dantal Hatir Une Khowa Howdah* (1988) (translated into English as *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of a Tusker*) of the famous award-winning author late Dr. Indira Goswami who had done extensive research on the living conditions of women, especially the Brahmin widows, in the traditional Assamese society. Set in Assam of Northern India during the 1940s, this film projects the tragic dilemma of three widows—Durga, Gosani and Giribala who are seen struggling against the oppressiveness of a male-centered religious set-up that relegates them to subservient roles after the demise of their husbands. These three women live in the home of a wealthy “Sattradhikaar” who is also the chief of the local religious and cultural center of Neo-Vaishnavism called the Sattrā—a unique socio religious and cultural institution of Assam. But, due to sudden providential changes after the death of their husbands, each of them is forced to endure the pangs of widowhood and the consequent identity crisis as women in a male dominated society. Durga, the elderly widowed sister of the Sattradhikaar and a typical caste-Hindu widow, is determined to arrange for her late husband’s last rites in Kashi, but before she finishes, her gold ornaments are stolen; Gosani or Saru-Goshani is the widow of the brother of the “Sattradhikaar”, who is trying hard to manage her late husband's estate until a manager she trusted most, betrays her. Thus, she is crushed by the revelation of perfidy. And finally, it is

Giribala—the daughter of the “Sattradhikaar”, the youngest, the most rebellious and the most beautiful of the three who breaks taboos and shocks everyone by submitting herself into the arms of a British scholar, Mark Sahib. When opposition grows too intense from both the society and the family, the rebellious Giribala resolves her situation in a spectacular and tragic manner by submitting to self-immolation following the rites of expiation imposed on her by the local Brahmin priest. As the ruthless tale of the inhuman austerities and cruelties perpetrated on Brahmin widows in an orthodox Hindu Assamese society and its even more orthodox attitude towards love, sex, marriage and widowhood, this film impresses the audience as an exceptionally bold film where social documentation gains tremendous significance from feminist point of view.

Can Media-Technology Actually Communicate?

I assume that my understanding of the film is derived from what it has to say about sexual and cultural establishments in upper-caste Hindu Assamese society often dictated by religious rights and orthodoxies. I am less concerned with the probable message of the director Bardoloi who is trying to deliver while examining the tensions within a joint Hindu family ranging from sexual transgression to spiritual salvation. It is thus crucial to situate this film in a feminist critical discourse around the status of oppressed Assamese women in recent times. However, such critical discussion makes even more sense when seen against the information available in a recent book entitled—*Violence Against Women in India: A Literature Review* which presents an eye-opening picture regarding the Indian widows. According to this ‘Review’, the widows have to adopt any of the available mandatory options—Sati, Ascetic Widowhood and Remarriage. In this context, we can also look at the other interesting findings in the report. Some of the essential factors that account for high levels of deprivation among Indian widows include limited freedom to remarry, insecure property rights, social restrictions on living arrangements, restricted employment opportunities and lack of social support. Widows are often victimized by relatives, informal care providers, house owners, friends of formal care givers in institutional set-up. This picture is obvious in a film like “Adajya”. Although we no longer hear of Sati now-a-days, what is common in the condition of all widows is to lead an ascetic life with respective codes of dress, diet and demeanour, and social ostracism from the religious and social life of the community. She is expected to remain in perpetual mourning, and give up eating ‘spicy food’, in order to cool her sexual energy, and remain celibate, devout and loyal to her husband’s memory. A bold critique of such inhuman atrocities done against the widows came from the film “Adajya” and subsequently, it received many national and international awards. What is worth noticing is that all these characteristics of a Hindu orthodox Assamese society are abundantly discussed in the film “Adajya” and there is no denying the fact that the director of the film does full justice to Indira Goswami’s novel.

Now, to address the issue of representation through media technology we can argue that representation in general is the reproductive potentials of certain ideas/issues made accessible to the audience through different means of communication. Another way to look at representation, in the context of film studies, is to examine the ability of films to draw upon features of the world and present them both as reflections as well as constructions. While doing so, however, representation is heavily influenced by culture (by culture I mean the male dominated Hindu culture), but it also shapes culture and moulds society’s attitudes, values, perceptions and

behaviour. This understanding naturally leads us to the confrontation of the dichotomy between reality and projection. In her discussion of 'Woman as Image' and 'Man as Bearer of the Look' in the much acclaimed article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", Laura Mulvey argues that in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female and that the determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. Another author Sue Thornham, while revealing the relationship between women and media in her book *Women, Feminism and Media* argues that the characteristics of the 'real women' can clearly be differentiated from the 'false glossy images' as which they are 'packaged' in a film. (Thornham, 2) Such considerations, Thornham argues, produce women 'as a commodity-object and as a negative sign in a male-dominated culture' (Thornham, 2). She further states that representation through technology offers 'pleasures'—the pleasures of self-recognition, of finding women placed center-stage in a 'woman's genre', of participating in a shared 'women's culture'—but simultaneously also acts to contain women within the accepted bounds of femininity and the consequent insularity. (Thornham, 6). In a somewhat different context, Judy Wajcman in her book *Feminism Confronts Technology* writes that men have monopolized technology as an important source of their power; and that women's lack of technological skills is an important element in their dependence on men. Such analysis helps us locate the issue in a kind of Women's Studies which questions the role of technology in representing the issues of women, and the gendered nature of 'man-made' technological advancement.

Thus, the engagement with the issue of representation of subjectivity, identity and culture through technology bears tremendous significance in critical discussions. In the same context, we can also look at the role played by a number of film journals like *Women and Film* (1972) and *Feminist Media Studies* (2001). The editors of the first journal stated that women suffer a threefold oppression within film: they are oppressed as workers within the film industry (they are 'receptionists, secretaries, odd job girls, prop girls' and so on), they are oppressed by being packaged as images (sex objects, victims or vampires); and they are oppressed within male-centered and exclusionary film theory. 'The struggle', of women therefore, 'begins on all fronts'. Thus, discussed in terms of representation through technology, films made with a purpose of empowering women, themselves begin with some shortcomings for which such films can never be seen as reliable sources of materials. Although, some of the basic concerns of the second-wave feminism include the 'misrepresentation' of women in the fantasy images circulated by the media, a second concern also incorporates the way in which a real woman is actually represented—or more accurately not represented or misrepresented. Besides, new technologies, as Thornham observes, have profoundly changed not only the gendered identities but embodiment itself, and the counter-argument to this is that representation instead can be seen as a continuation of existing power-relations and the re-articulation of pre-existing cultural narratives. Subsequently, she traces a number of central, overlapping narratives in accounts of new media technologies, arguing that each of these narratives is organized around a key image, an image which in each case carries gendered connotations." (Thornham, 22) Taking the experience of reading such author-critics and the issue of representation of women through visual media, the discussion on the film "Adajya" in this paper, makes room for an interesting case study.

Thus, from the discussion made in the previous paragraphs, it becomes almost clear that technology-aided representation is actually determined and influenced by matters of production, exchange and circulation of cultural values. So, while making a possible connection between certain Western discourses and the filmic representation of the Assamese women in the film “Adajya”, we encounter various images of women expressed mainly through three distinct categories—one who writes, one who is written about, and finally one who directs. And thus, it is pertinent to examine whether such categories are successful in negotiating the kind of representational processes of which they are also a part. If not, then what purpose does a film like this serve in exposing the ills of a traditional society? A related but fundamental question is whether the new media technologies can actually generate ‘spaces for women to play with, create, subvert and renegotiate subjectivities and identities.’ (Thornham, 17). But identities are formed and reformed through experience, relationships, society, culture, history and language. Since our sense of the self is a matter of constant (re)interpretation of what can be called ‘an active construction’ through an interpretation of ourselves in time, we must remain alert to find out if such an understanding can also affect our interpretation of the film. It is to be mentioned that from women to manual trades set up in the early 1970s, to trained women in traditionally male skills, to the women pursuing computing courses of the 1980s, feminist groups and campaigns have attempted to break man’s grip of technical expertise and win greater autonomy and technical competence for women. (Wajcman, VIII) However, the point is that women’s relationship with technology is a contradictory one as it is often conditioned by the realization that technology itself is a social construct. This has further opened up new possibilities for feminist scholarship and action. Since 1972, “Women Make Movies” in the West had encouraged progressive thoughts and creative freedom among women filmmakers from a wide variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Many acclaimed women directors have inspired other fellow women to create films which intended to explore aspects of art, identity and politics. Thus, WMM was the first amongst such institution to foster a feminist-friendly work environment for women entering the business of film distribution and promotion. This unique history of women joining hands with media technology coupled with the institution’s support to extend arts and education through alternative media, has not only made WMM a long-standing advocate for quality films by women, but also an organization dedicated to advancing social change. (Dorsey, 221-226) In the context of such a creative environment in the Western world, attempts made in Assam by a woman-director like Bardoloi is undoubtedly praiseworthy. Whether Bardoloi is informed of such organizations in the West, is not known. But this film has opened up spaces for discussing certain vital issues of our society through the tragic stories of Durga, Gosani and Giribala.

Considering such issues, I would like to assume that, because of the intrusion of technologies, there remain certain inadequacies in this film. The gendered nature of technology also becomes obvious in the way the director of the film is seen conforming to the demands of the male-centered gaze while taking close up shots of Giribala and while presenting the victimized women as a category. But most importantly, the film has shown how women themselves become the oppressors within the same patriarchal culture. The gap between the settings of 1940s and that of 1990s, during which the film was made, is also carefully bridged. But it also seems that the present period of the director is always intruding into her perception of the women of 60 years ago the result of which is explicit in her making certain scenes look very contemporary. Discussing the provisionality of one’s sense of identity, I am reminded of

what Stuart Hall had argued on the idea of identity—"Who I am-the 'real' me-was formed in relation to a whole set of other narratives. I was aware of the fact that identity is an invention from the very beginning, long before I understood any of this theoretically. Identity is formed at the unstable point where the 'unspeakable' stories of subjectivity meet the narrative of history, of a culture." (Stuart Hall quoted in Thornham, 19) If films are interpreted as narratives, then it is the patriarchal culture that tends to justify the representation of women's identity in relation to the stories of which they are a part. So, when we consider the use of technology, it becomes obvious that technology itself demands its specific manipulations in a male-centered discourse, and Santwana Bardoloi must have found it really hard to compromise with the ethos of a male-centered ideology while making this film. Thus, my contention is that Bardoloi is compelled to 'objectify' the women in this film although her efforts are mainly against such objectifications which deny women identity and sexuality.

Conclusion without a Closure

Despite all criticisms, the film "Adajya" demands new critical attention as I feel that more discussion on the film is necessary in order to advance our understanding of issues of feminism and sexuality in today's (Assamese) society. Mary E. John and TejaswiniNiranjana, in their paper on Deepa Mehta's film "Fire", question the responsibilities of feminist film criticism in the current context. They tend to ask if we are not supposed to go beyond identifying good and bad images of women while critiquing the status of women in a traditional Hindu society. Just like Deepa Mehta's award winning film "Fire", "Adajya" too represents patriarchy (although the context and setting of both the films are noticeably different) as being founded on the denial of female sexuality. But, the interesting point to be noted here is that—by taking this idea literally, the film imprisons itself in the very ideology it originally sought to fight, its own version of authentic reality being nothing but a mirror image of the patriarchal discourse. The patriarchal ideology, realized through certain cultural practices of control, is first reduced to essentialise pure denial of women and is later simply inverted to produce the film's own vision of woman's liberation (like Giribala's self-immolation) as free sexual 'choice'. However, in "Adajya" the dominant feminist attitudes towards the so-called 'objectification' of women through media technologies have not really changed significantly. In fact, these attitudes are currently sought to be revived amidst widespread panic over the perceived proliferation of visual sexual images under globalization. The hope is—films like "Adajya" should multiply to address issues of deprivation of women in our Indian society.

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